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Preface

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Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (2015). 2nd ed. "Preface". *Art And Its Objects: With Six Supplementary Essays*. ix-x. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781316286777.001
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/535>

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Preface to this edition

RICHARD ELDRIDGE



Art and its Objects ends abruptly with the claim – surprising in an age obsessed with distinguishing between facts and values and with worrying about the logical status of value judgments – that, deliberately, next to nothing has been said in this book about the evaluation of art. Instead, Wollheim's central aim is to understand what we are doing when we are either making or attending to art – an enterprise, as it were, of descriptive phenomenology. Two related, central ideas running through his account are that we demand a certain sort of experience from the things that we undertake to engage with as art, and that artmakers are typically responsive to this demand.

Both the nature of this demand and the available modes of response to it then emerge as far more complex and interesting than unidimensional accounts of art as a matter of pleasure or expression or form alone suppose. For one thing, works of art fall into types – poems, sculptures, operas, paintings, buildings, ballets, among others – not all of which require the work of art to be itself a physical object. More important, even when the work is a physical object, as in sculpture or painting, it has formal, expressive, and stylistic properties that are not reducible either to its physical features alone or to mere effects in the minds of its recipients. Hence Wollheim powerfully criticizes both sensuous-presentationalist-formalist theories of art and phenomenalist-idealist theories of art for focusing on only one aspect of works that typically and centrally involve the working of materials, against a background of practices and traditions, for the sake of complex, interrelated effects. What Wollheim calls 'the working of the medium' (p. 36) – pictorial, verbal, acoustic, and so on – matters.

There is no way apart from historically and critically informed experience of art to specify the materials and modes of working them that yield successful works. Both 'the artistic impulse' (p. 93) and the demands we make on art are, while rooted in biological facts about human beings, nonetheless not reducible to them. Art is related to life in taking up 'deep feelings that pattern themselves in a coherent way over all our life and behavior' (p. 97), but it also articulates and develops these feelings in

distinctive ways that outrun their biological bases, just as distinctive cuisines develop in ways that well outrun the human need for nutrition.

Hence art is, as Wollheim puts it, borrowing a phrase from Wittgenstein, 'a form of life' (p. 90). Along with religion, science, cooking, building, and many other practices, art is an irreducible and distinctive mode of the enactment, articulation, and development of the human. *Art and its objects* – both its aims and the things through which those aims are fulfilled – are, therefore, essential modes of human existence. This result, powerfully argued for and still unsurpassed in subtlety of development, is of the first importance not only for aesthetics, but also for philosophy of mind, value theory, and social philosophy. It is welcome to have it available for a new generation of readers.